

O. E. Nepomnin, *Istoriia Kitaia: Epoha Tsin, XVII-nachalo XX veka* [The history of China: The period of the Qing Dynasty, 17th-early 20th centuries]
Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2005, 712 pp.

Rostislav Berezkin (白若思) *

This large book by Professor O. E. Nepomnin deals with the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), giving a detailed overview of the main political events and the conditions of the society, economy, and culture during this period. The author also has quite original views on the historical processes operating during the Qing Dynasty. In spite of a variety of views on the Qing, there is a scholarly consensus that this period has a special place in the history of China: it was the time when contacts with Westerners became close and eventually led to the “opening” of the country; and because of several internal and external factors, the society and state underwent tremendous changes that resulted in the collapse of the traditional state and monarchy in China. These issues are the subjects of Nepomnin’s monograph.

One should note that Nepomnin’s work continues a long tradition of studies of Qing history in Russia. Russian sinologists began conducting research on Qing history at the height of the dynasty itself. The first translations of historical works in Chinese and Manchu and original research by Russian scholars appeared at the second

* 復旦大學文史研究院副研究員

half of the eighteenth century. For example, A.S. Agafonov (ca. 1734-1794) and F. Baksheev (ca. 1737-ca. 1787), students of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing, compiled “Zhurnal sekretnykh deistvii, namerenii, sluchaev i peremen, byvshih v Taitsinskom Gosudarstve s 1772 po 1787 goda” (“The diary of the secret actions, intentions, incidents and changes that took place in the Tai-Qing State between 1772 and 1787”), which contained quite precise information about the events in China at that time. This work was partly published by K.M. Tertitskii in the journal *Vostochnaia Kolleksiia (Oriental Collection)* in 2003. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russian scholars continued to publish on Qing history. During the Soviet period, historians of China published a collective volume on the history of the dynasty that was a result of a project headed by S. L. Tihvinskii, Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences: *Novaia istoriia Kitaiia* [Modern history of China (Moscow: Nauka, 1972)]. However, since that time many new historical sources have become available, and views and methodology have changed. Nepomnin regards his work as the continuation of the project by Tihvinskii (p. 4); indeed, his work surpasses the old volume in terms of materials and theoretical approach.

Nepomnin has quite special views on the modern history of China. His main approach is based on the theory of the “cyclical development” of China: the history of this country is interpreted as a succession of dynastic cycles, each of them different in length. This theory, which essentially originated in the Chinese traditional historiography, was accepted and developed by the Russian historians of China, most notably S. A. Nefedov. According to Nepomnin, the scheme of this cycle is standard. Each dynasty started after a period of domestic wars and massive destruction, and underwent four main stages: 1) restoration of the state systems and economy, 2) stabilization, 3) demographic and political crisis, and 4) catastrophe. The primary cause of the crisis was the surplus of labor force, related to the lack of land resources and inability of industry to accommodate the migrant landless workers. After the

demographic catastrophe, when a large part of the population perished, a new cycle started, and the common scheme repeated. The cyclical model of development becomes especially obvious from the period of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Traditional histories of China usually adopt this model and represent the history of the country as a succession of stable periods of “dynasties” with short interregnums. Nepomnin contrasts this cyclical development of China with the linear progressive development that was characteristic of European countries. In his view, China’s cyclical development explains the stagnation and the ultimate collapse of the entire system of traditional Chinese empire. For example, the crisis at the end of the Ming Dynasty made the country very vulnerable in regard to foreign aggression: this crisis explains the conquest of the country by the smaller and less culturally developed nation of Manchus in the seventeenth century. The Manchu dynasty in its turn was continuously defeated by Western countries, which eventually forced the rulers to adopt Western models of development, initially in the industrial sphere and eventually in the political sphere as well.

Nepomnin’s view, however, should not be confused with the cyclical view of history embedded in the traditional dynastic histories, as in his opinion, during the late period of Chinese history, the cycle does not correspond to a dynasty. Nepomnin has divided the reign of the Qing Dynasty into two cycles, termed the “Qing” and the “Taiping” cycles. From the social and economic perspective, he has characterized the Qing cycle as traditional society, while the Taiping cycle represents the transitional stage towards a modern system. During the Taiping cycle, linear development in China also became prevalent; this resulted in a combination of the two modes of development. Nepomnin draws the boundary between the two cycles in the year 1870, which marked the defeat of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1868) and related uprisings. After that period of domestic wars and foreign aggression (1840-1870), the Qing Dynasty managed to survive and a short period of reconstruction and relative

prosperity started. Nepomnin also does not end the Taiping cycle with the fall of the Qing Dynasty: in his view the catastrophe phase lasted until approximately 1949, when the country was reunified under the rule of the Communist Party. He even interprets the period from 1950 to today as a new cycle (pp. 8-9, 638-644); therefore, he applies his theory of cycles to the contemporary period as well.

One can easily criticize Nepomnin's historiographical theory; however, in my view, his views are quite well substantiated. Nepomnin's methodology is informed by the traditional historiography of China and is thus comparatively free of "Western-centered" paradigms; and at the same time, his theory does not follow the Chinese stereotypes, thus being quite innovative. Therefore, Nepomnin's book is an important milestone in modern Russian interpretations of the recent history of China. Furthermore, the comprehensive history of the Qing by Nepomnin is very logically organized; his theory of two cycles affecting the Qing period (and beyond) provides the main principle for the organization of rich and diverse material. The book consists of two parts, which deal respectively with the Qing cycle (1644-1870) and the first part of the Taiping cycle (1870-1911). However, the book begins with a short overview of the Ming cycle (1368-1644) that sets the stage for the Manchu conquest of China.

Two other innovative points should be noted in regard to Nepomnin's theory. First, it is important that he has drawn the division line between two periods in the modern history of China not with the Opium Wars (which he terms the "trade wars," 1839-1842 and 1858-1860), but with the Taiping Rebellion. This is a break from much scholarship on modern China, including Russian scholarship, that uses the Opium Wars to mark the break with the traditional period: for example, the classical Russian handbook of the history of China: A.V. Meliksetov, ed., *Istoriia Kitaiia* [Chinese history (Moscow: Moscow State University, 2nd revised ed., 2002), pp. 296-342]. Nepomnin thus breaks with Western-centered scholarly models that

emphasize the West's own role in Chinese history and that have dominated the field (including Chinese Communist interpretations). Rather, Nepomnin's periodization depends on China's internal developments. Second, Nepomnin does not conclude his story with the 1911 Revolution and abdication of the last Qing emperor, Puyi, in 1912. He continues the narrative up to the 1920s, analyzing the long process of the disappearance of the monarchic structure in China. Nepomnin emphasizes the attempts to restore the Qing Dynasty, notably one led by Zhang Xun in 1917. He also interprets the dictatorship and the attempt to establish a new dynasty by Yuan Shikai in 1915-1916 as the result of the persistence of millennia-old state ideology and ways of governing after the democratic revolution took place. The book ends with a short overview of the Japanese-supported puppet monarchy Manzhouguo (Manchukuo, 1932-1945) that though officially presented as the successor of the Qing Dynasty, was in fact completely different from it (pp. 605-607).

As there is no English summary in Nepomnin's monograph, I provide the list of its chapters here. In part 1 "The Qing cycle," chapter 1 deals with the appearance of the Manchu state (1616) and the Qing Dynasty (1636) in Manchuria; chapter 2 – the Qing conquest of China and the end of the rebellion led by Li Zicheng (1628-1645); chapter 3 – the stabilization policies of the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong reigns as well as the signs of political and demographic crisis at the end of the eighteenth century; chapter 4 – the rural economy; chapter 5 – the urban economy; chapter 6 – the social structure; chapter 7 – the political system; chapter 8 – the culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; chapter 9 – the period of "isolation" (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) and expanding crisis, including the White Lotus (1796-1804) and other rebellions and the "opium" conflict; chapter 10 – the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion; chapter 11 – the stage of "catastrophe" of the traditional system and the suppression of the Taiping and other rebellions. Part 2 "The Taiping cycle" consists of 8 chapters. Chapter 12 is devoted to the events of the

1870-1890s, including the Franco-Chinese War (1884-1885), Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the political struggle at the court in the 1890s and the Boxer Uprising (1898-1900); chapter 13 – the social and economic evolution of China in the transitional period; chapter 14 – the “new policy” of the court and the collapse of the dynasty; chapter 15 – the 1911 Revolution and the end of the dynasty; chapter 16 – the dictatorship of Yuan Shikai and the civil war; chapter 17 – the attempts to restore the Qing; chapter 18 – the social and economic changes during the early period of the Republic; and chapter 19 – the culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chapters dealing with the economy and the social life of China are especially informative. This is to be expected, as Nepomnin specializes in the economy and society of the Qing period. The chapter about the rural economy includes an analysis of the state and private sectors in agriculture, forms of taxes and rent, types of trade, and rural industries. The chapter about the urban economy introduces types of industries and labor organization, technology, handicrafts, transportation, money and banking systems. Special attention is paid to the variety of regional economies and specific Chinese industries and handicrafts. Nepomnin discusses the problems in the different sectors of economy that led to the collapse of the traditional system and the processes of transformation of the Chinese economy from 1870 to 1911. The classification of the strata of Qing society is very detailed. Nepomnin demonstrates that although officially there were only four major social groups (or estates) in the Qing period – scholars, peasantry, craftsmen, and merchants – the real stratification of society was very complex. Nepomnin classifies the social groups as classes, estates, and the smaller groups within estates, using economic as well as legal standards. He also provides an important discussion of the specifics of the state policy in Qing China. According to Nepomnin, the state represented by the emperor and his court was the supreme landowner and “the monopolist of power” in China. In these aspects the status of the state structures was completely different from those in European

countries. The nobility class was not influential in China; instead, the bureaucratic class developed; the legal foundations of private property were weak. In comparison with Europe, in Qing China the state exercised almost total control of politics and ideology. All this resulted in the different ways of development of society in China and Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The attention to the material aspects of culture is one of the merits of this book and is also quite traditional in Russian studies of Chinese history. Other issues that have been thoroughly studied by Russian sinologists and are also developed in Nepomnin's monograph include the policy of the Qing towards northern people and the uprisings against Qing rule. Due to several historical and political reasons, Russian sinology has always been interested in the history of the interaction of China with the states of Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Nepomnin devotes considerable space to the expansion of the Qing Dynasty in these areas (pp. 99-100, 111-113, 125-129). He also discusses in detail the contacts of the Qing state and Russian empire (pp. 97-98, 113, 365, 418). During the Soviet period, when Marxist views of the "class struggle" were prevalent, Russian scholars extensively studied the uprisings of the Qing period and the anti-Manchu struggle: the White Lotus Rebellion, the Taipings, the Small Swords (Xiaodaohui, 1853-1855), the Nianjun (1852-1868), small nations of the Southwest and Muslim rebellions in Yunnan (1855-1873), the Boxers (Yihetuan), and revolutionary movements that got underway at the end of the nineteenth century. Nepomnin devoted special sub-chapters to these events. Also notable are his two overviews of the spiritual culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and nineteenth to early twentieth centuries that summarize the considerable achievements of Russian scholars in these fields.

As for the drawbacks of Nepomnin's book, one can point to several outdated interpretations of historical events. For example, he characterizes Li Zicheng's uprising and the Taiping Rebellion as "peasant wars," which was a traditional

interpretation in Soviet-period histories; however, most modern scholars would not agree with this view. Nepomnin also pays relatively little attention to the religious policies of the Qing rulers, and underplays the religious aspect of anti-Qing uprisings, for example, in his discussion of the White Lotus Rebellion (pp. 359-360).

As the bibliographical part of the book demonstrates, Nepomnin has used a large variety of Chinese sources and research works. He has also consulted the works by eminent Western scholars of Qing history, including John King Fairbank, Joseph W. Esherick, Mark C. Elliott, Susan Naquin, Philip A. Kuhn and others. The references to Western works make the presentation of views on Qing history in the book more complete and varied.

Nepomnin's book is obviously designed for a general reader, notably historians who are not specializing in Chinese history. It contains several tables, indexes, a glossary of foreign terms, and maps that certainly facilitate the comprehension of material by the non-specialist reader. The book can serve as a reference edition for specialists as well as non-specialist readers. However, one of its drawbacks is the lack of Chinese characters for even basic terms and names. This lacuna creates some difficulties for students of Chinese language and history, who obviously constitute a significant part of the target audience of this book. On the whole, however, the book offers notable interpretations of Qing history and aptly summarizes the achievements of Russian sinologists in this field. It makes a useful handbook of Chinese history and certainly constitutes pleasant reading for the various categories of the interested audience.